

# O'Rourke (Connaught) Family Crest and History

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## SURNAME

**Surname:** Roark

**Branch:** O'Rourke (Connaught)

**Origins:** Irish

**More Info:** [Ireland](#)



**Background:** O'Rourke comes from the Irish "O Ruairc", from Ruarc, a personal name derived from the Old Norse Hrothekr, meaning 'famous king'. The O'Rourkes were of the same stock as the O'Connors of Connacht, part of the large tribal grouping of the Ui Briain, claiming common descent from Brion, a fifth-century King of Connacht.

The Ruarc from whom the surname derives was a ninth-century King of Bréifne, an area covering most of the modern counties of Leitrim and Cavan. The first to use his name as part of an hereditary surname was his grandson, Sean Fearghal O Ruairc, who died in 964. Over the following century and a half, four O'Rourkes were Kings of Connacht. After the twelfth century, they appear to have accepted the overlordship of the O'Connors, however reluctantly. They also had persistent problems with the other pre-eminent family of Bréifne, the O'Reillys, which ultimately resulted in their territory being much reduced.

The main stronghold of the family was at Dromahair, on the shores of Lough Gill in Co Leitrim. In common with most of the other ruling families of Gaelic Ireland, the O'Rourkes lost all of their possessions in the great upheavals of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

## HERALDRY

**Motto:** "Buagh" meaning victory; or "Serviendo Guberno" translated "I Govern By Serving" or "By Ruling I Serve".

**Arms:** Or two lions passant in pale sable.

**Crest:** Out of an ancient Irish Crown or an arm in armor erect grasping a sword proper, pommel and hilt of the first.

View the [Heraldry Dictionary](#) for help.

## HISTORY

First, it is important to understand that like most Irish names originating from the Gaelic the spelling RORKE is a variant of O'Rourke. Other variant spellings include Rourke, O'Rorke, Roark, and Ruark. O'Rourke is an anglicized form derived from the Gaelic "O Ruairc". Ruarc was a personal name originating with the Old Norse Hrothekr, meaning 'famous king'. The prefix 'O' signifies grandson of or descendant and indicates the patronymic origin of the name. So it seems that Ruarc's mother must have been a Norse woman. For six centuries after this date, we find Norse names among the O Ruaircs, as well as in other Irish families: Lochlann, which means Norway, Sitric and Amhlaibh (Olaf).

The O'Rourkes were one of the most celebrated clans in Irish history. The first King of Breifne entitled to call himself O Ruairc was Ruarc's grandson Sean Ferghal, a man who lived to a great age, as his name Sean (old) implies. He must have been a great warrior, for he was the first of the Ui Briuin Breifne to become King of Connacht, after generations of Ui Briuin Ai kings (ancestors of the O Conors). Sean Ferghal died in 964 in battle. His death is recorded in the Chronicum Scotorum records.

A poet wrote of Ferghal:

"Since Hector was slain by the Greeks,  
or since Achilles was slain at pleasant Troy,  
there has not been killed - it is no lie-  
a splendid warrior like the royal, noble  
grandson of Ruarc."

The O'Rourkes were one of the great princely families of Ireland. They were lords of Breffny and provided four Kings of Connacht in the period prior to the Norman Invasion of 1170. The ancient territory of Breffny comprises the modern counties of Cavan and West Leitrim. The O'Rourkes once held vast tracts of land there which, at the height of their power, extended from Kells in County Meath to Sligo.

After Cromwell's invasion, many of the great Gaelic families, including many O'Rourkes, left Ireland in exile. Some became military leaders in European countries and some of their descendants were among the most powerful families in Russia and Poland before the Russian Revolution. For example, Joseph O'Rourke, Prince O'Rourke in the Russian aristocracy, was General-in-Chief of the Russian Empire in 1700; and, two Count Owen O'Rourkes served Maria Teresa of Austria from 1750-1780. Additionally, Father Manus O'Rourke, (1660-1741) who was exiled in France, wrote voluminously in the Irish language during his lifetime. Even as late as the 20th century, an O'Rourke appears as the Bishop of Danzig.

**Tiernan O'Rourke and the Norman Invasion** Best known among the O'Rourke clan is perhaps Tiernan O'Rourke, Prince of Breffny, who was killed in battle in 1172. As the story goes, Dermot MacMurrough, King of Leinster, kidnapped Tiernan's wife, Devorgilla. The repercussions of that incident, some might say, led to the Norman Invasion.

Dermot MacMurrough became King of Leinster in 1133 and quickly began to expand his power. In 1152 he helped Turlough O'Connor raid Tiernan O'Rourke's land. After O'Rourke's land was destroyed and his castle burned, the armies left for their respective provinces. As MacMurrough was traveling through Meath on his way to Leinster, the King of Meath told him that Dervorgilla, O'Rourke's wife and also the King of Meath's sister, would run away with him. MacMurrough carried away Dervorgilla with all her furniture and cows. When O'Rourke discovered his wife had been taken, he was furious. This, of course, made MacMurrough O'Rourke's most bitter enemy. After one year, Dermot was forced to give Dervorgilla back, but O'Rourke never forgave or forgot the episode.

In 1166, when Ireland was ablaze with various territorial war, O'Rourke joined with several other chieftains and raided Leinster. MacMurrough barely escaped with his life and sailed to England for help. There he sought the assistance of Henry II to get his kingdom back from O'Rourke.

MacMurrough gathered a force of Norman and Welsh soldiers and returned to Ireland. The Normans, long settled in England since their conquest in 1066, and having taken over Wales from

the Celts, welcomed the promise of new rich lands. In 1167 MacMurrough landed in Waterford with a party of Normans, to be followed later by others, and in 1170 by "Strongbow", Richard de Clair. de Clair married MacMurrough's daughter Eva, and when MacMurrough died the following year, he became the new King of Leinster.

The High King, Rory O'Connor, and the King of Breifne, Tiernan O'Rourke, struggled to resist these newcomers who would change their world. The following year, Tiernan O'Rourke was killed by the Norman leader, Hugo de Lacy, who decapitated him and sent his head to Dublin to be impaled on the fortress gate. For the next 150 years there would be no dominant O'Rourke. The eligible men of the clan fought one another for the kingship, and the Lords of Breifne changed hands in quick succession.

Today, many credit the feud between MacMurrough and O'Rourke with instigating the Norman invasion. Regardless, the constant struggle for power among various clan chiefs and kings was a constant in the lives of the Gaelic Irish. Murder and barbaric behavior was prevalent, and clan leaders that stand out in history today seem to have been among the most ruthless.

#### Another Account:

In mediaeval times the O'Rourkes were one of the great princely families of Ireland, being Lords of Breffny and providing more than one King of Connacht in the period prior to the Norman invasion. At various times their territory expanded or contracted largely because of the long standing rivalry between the O'Rourkes and O'Reillys in Breffny. At its widest it extended from Kells, in Co.. Meath, to Sligo. After Cromwell, like all great Gaelic families its star declined. many of its ablest members left the country to become valued leaders, particularly military leaders, in European countries: their descendants are still (or were till Russian Communism upset the old order) among the important families in Russia and Poland. Joseph O'Rourke, Prince O'Rourke in the Russian aristocracy, was General-in-Chief of the Russian Empire in 1700 and Patrick Count O'Rourke was a distinguished member of the same service in the middle of the last century, while two Owen O'Rourkes, both Counts, served Maria Teresa of Austria from 1750 to 1780. Of those who went to France the most noteworthy were Col. Count John O'Rourke (c. 1705-1786) and Father Manus O'Rourke (1660-1741) who during a lifetime as an exile wrote voluminously in the Irish language. With a great sept like this, of course, such emigration, though it impoverished their prestige at home, had little effect on numbers, and the Rourke and O'Rourkes (including such variant spellings as Rorke and Roark) constitute a body of population sufficiently large to find a place in the one hundred most numerous names in Ireland. The bulk of these, as might be expected, are to be found in the counties comprising the old territory of Breffny (I.e Cavan, Leitrim and part of the adjoining counties). Apart from those O'Rourkes who distinguished themselves in continental armies and other forms of foreign service, there have been many notable Irishmen of the name. Earliest of these is Tiernan O'Rourke, Prince of Breffny (killed in battle 1172), who is best known on account of the epoch-making events which followed the carrying off of his wife Dervogilla by Dermot MacMorrogh; Brian O'Rourke, inaugurated Chief of the Name in 1564, had a most romantic career, ending, still without knowing a word of the English language, on the scaffold in London; his son Brain O'Rourke, also Chief of the Name, was equally hostile to the English but died a natural death in 1604. In a very different sphere Edmund O'Rourke (1814-1879) may be mentioned; he was in his day famous under the pseudonym of Edmund Falconer, as a dramatist and actor-manager. It is probable that William Michael Rooke (1794-1847), the Dublin-born composer, came of a family of Rourkes whose name had been corrupted to Rooke.

**Name Variations:** O'Rorke, Rorke, O'Rourke, Rourke, Roark, Ruark.

#### References:

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